

“AARON AND HIS SONS”—A PREFIGURATION OF THE VIRGIN?

GUDRUN ENGBERG

IN the parecclesion of the Kariye Djami in Istanbul there is a cycle of scenes from the Old Testament which, in the publication of that monument, are identified as “Old Testament Prefigurations of the Virgin.”¹ These scenes all have inscriptions taken from the Old Testament, except for the one depicting “Jacob Wrestling with the Angel.” In two of the scenes the inscription is almost illegible; and, while the rest of the scenes are easily identifiable as illustrations to biblical lessons for Marian feasts, these two (which the editor calls “Isaiah Prophesying; The Angel Smiting the Assyrians before Jerusalem” and “Aaron and His Sons before the Altar”) are more difficult to explain. Even though they contain symbols of the Virgin, their connection with the other scenes is somewhat weak: the others give concrete illustrations of Old Testament lessons read for feasts for the Virgin, while these two simply provide a conglomerate of Marian τύποι that do not refer to any particular quotation from the Old Testament.

A comparison of the legible inscriptions with the Septuagint² on the one hand and the Old Testament lessons of the Orthodox Church on the other reveals how closely the painter followed the lectionary text as opposed to the Bible text. For the lessons I shall use the text of the edition of the Prophetologium,³ which is being established from manuscripts written in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Constantinople, and also the printed Menaion.⁴

¹ Paul A. Underwood, *The Kariye Djami* (New York, 1966), 3 vols., Scenes [228]–[236], 1, pp. 223–237; 3, pls. 437–468. I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Underwood for his help and encouragement throughout my work on this article.

² *Septuaginta*, ed. A. Rahlfs, 5th ed. (Stuttgart, 1952), 2 vols. Hereafter referred to as LXX.

³ *Monumenta Musicae Byzantinae, Lectionaria*, 1: *Prophetologium*. The text in question is in preparation by the present author.

⁴ *Μηναία τοῦ ὁλοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ* (Rome, 1888–1901), 6 vols.

The lesson scenes are the following: “Jacob’s Ladder,” inscribed with verses 11–13, from the lesson of Genesis 28 : 10–17, which in Constantinople was read during the vigils before the feasts of the Nativity and of the Dormition of the Virgin, and usually also on the eve of the feast of the Annunciation; “Moses and the Burning Bush,” inscribed with verses 1–2, 5, from the lesson of Exodus 3 : 1–8, which was read on the day of the Annunciation; and “The Dedication of Solomon’s Temple,” illustrating III Reg. 8 : 1, 3–6, which inscription is part of III Reg. 8 : 1, 3–7, 9–11, the reading for the evening before the feast of the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple.

In the first of these inscriptions⁵ the quotation does not start with the beginning of the lesson, where Jacob’s name is mentioned. The painter had to supply this himself. He thus added the name of Jacob (“And Jacob took one of the stones”), which appears neither in LXX nor in the lectionary in this place. The omission or, possibly, disappearance of the final letter in κεφαλὴ precludes comparison with the πρὸς κεφαλῆς of LXX and the Prophetologium, and the πρὸς κεφαλῇν of the Menaion. But the division in the text *after* καὶ ἐνυπνιάσθη and not, as in LXX, *before*, points clearly to a connection with the Prophetologium. The Menaion likewise divides after, not before, these words. At the end of the inscription, ἀνέβαινον <καὶ> κατέβαινον ἐπ’ αὐτήν, corresponds to the Prophetologium, whereas LXX and the Menaion read ἐπ’ αὐτῆς.

The inscription of the Moses scene⁶ is identical with the beginning of the lesson in the Prophetologium, as well as in the Menaion: Εἰσῆλθεν μωσῆς εἰς τὸ ὄρος τοῦ θεοῦ χωρηβ, in contrast to LXX: Καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς τὸ ὄρος Χωρηβ.

⁵ Underwood, *op. cit.*, 1, p. 224; *Menaion*, 4 (1898), pp. 171–172.

⁶ Underwood, *op. cit.*, 1, pp. 226–228; *Menaion*, 4, p. 185.

The inscription for the first scene⁷ of "The Dedication of Solomon's Temple" is also clearly derived from the lectionary text:

τὰ ἄγια τὰ ἐν τῷ σκηνώματι τοῦ μαρτυρίου)
should be supplied, in which text the LXX,
the Prophetologium, and the Menaion all agree.

Inscription – ὥς συνετέλεσε σολομ(ων)
Prophetologium – Ἐγένετο ὥς συνετέλεσε σαλωμων
LXX, III Reg. 8:1 – Καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ συντελέσαι Σαλωμων

Inscr. – του οικοδομησα(ι τον ο)ικ(ον κυριο)υ
Proph. – τοῦ οἰκοδομῆσαι τὸν οἶκον κυρίου
LXX. – τοῦ οἰκοδομῆσαι τὸν οἶκον κυρίου καὶ τὸν οἶκον ἑαυτοῦ μετὰ

Inscr. – και εξ>ἐκκλησιασε παν<τας> τ(ους)
Proph. – και ἐξεκκλησίασε πάντας τοὺς
LXX. – εἴκοσι ἔτη τότε ἐξεκκλησίασεν ὁ βασιλεὺς Σαλωμων πάντας τοὺς

Inscr. – πρεσβυτερ(ους) κτλ.
Proph. – πρεσβυτέρους κτλ.
LXX. – πρεσβυτέρους κτλ.

The inscription from the Kariye Djami, it is true, omits the first word ἐγένετο. It is not clear from the reproduction of the scene whether this word could have stood at the beginning of the first line. If so, and if the rest of the missing letters were supplied to the left as well as to the right of the now readable text, the first three lines would prove to have been equal in length.

The Menaion is identical with the Prophetologium in the first verse, except that it reads σολωμων, as does our inscription. The omission of verse 2 (ἐν μηνι Ἀθανιν) is common to the Prophetologium, the Menaion, and the inscription.

The large space between ΔΑ<Δ> and ΑΥΤΗ in the third line of the same inscription leads to the conclusion that the painter followed the Prophetologium in reading καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶ σίων. Both LXX and the Menaion omit καί. Likewise, in the third verse of the quotation, in the third and fourth line of the inscription, the Prophetologium and the inscription agree in adding τῆς διαθήκης κυρίου, while LXX and the Menaion have only καὶ ἦραν οἱ ἱερεῖς τὴν κιβωτόν.

The inscription of the following scene, "The Bearing of the Sacred Vessels," is no longer visible. Without doubt the missing part of the quotation (καὶ πάντα τὰ σκεύη

The last part of the quotation which is placed above scene [234] differs from LXX in the spelling of the word δαβιρ. Both the Prophetologium and the inscription have δαβηρ.

Thus far every single scene has illustrated a quotation from the Old Testament lectionary forming part of a Marian lesson⁸—even the scene of "The Bearing of the Sacred Vessels" probably had its corresponding quotation—and the text is evidently taken from the Prophetologium. Should it not then be possible to show that the remaining two scenes conform to this orderly pattern?

The first of these scenes at once places itself somewhat outside the system; it is an illustration to the words of a lesson, but not to one read at a Marian feast. The scene of "The Angel Smiting the Assyrians before Jerusalem"⁹ illustrates the pericope from Isaiah 37 which was read on the vigil of June 5 to commemorate the Avar Surprise.¹⁰ The scene has lost its main inscription, which would have been situated in the upper part of the fresco. But the inscription on Isaiah's scroll is in part legible. It seems to correspond to Isaiah 37 : 33^a and, as far as I am able to read it, the text is that of the lectionary, rather than that of LXX:

⁸ "Jacob Wrestling with the Angel" is the only exception; it does not have an inscription.

⁹ Underwood, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 233–235; 3, pls. 461–465.

¹⁰ Cf. N. H. Baynes, "The Date of the Avar Surprise," *BZ*, 21 (1912), pp. 110–128.

⁷ Underwood, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 228–232; *Menaion*, 2 (1892), p. 219.

Inscription –	Ταδε λεγ<ει κ(υριο)>ς		
Prophetologium –	(διὰ τοῦτο) τάδε λέγει κύριος		
LXX, Isa. 37:33 –	(διὰ τοῦτο) οὕτως λέγει κύριος		
Inscr. –	τ(ων) θυνάμε<(ων) ε>π<ι> [π<ρος> ?] τ(ον) <β>ασιλ(εα)		
Proph. –	τῶν δυνάμεων	ἐπὶ	τὸν βασιλέα
LXX. –		ἐπὶ	βασιλέα
Inscr. –	τ(ῶν) ἄσυρι(ων) οὐ μὴ <εισ>ελθ(η) εἰς τ(ήν) πό(λιν) ταύτ(ην)		
Proph. –	τῶν ἄσσυρίων	οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃ	εἰς τὴν πόλιν ταύτην κτλ.
LXX. –	Ἀσσυρίων	οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃ	εἰς τὴν πόλιν ταύτην κτλ.

The lesson was read, according to some manuscripts, on any feast commemorating the salvation of Constantinople from its enemies. The prooemium of the Akathistos Hymn reminds us that in moments of crisis it is the Virgin who saves her city. It may not be a coincidence that this fresco was placed next to the portrait of Joseph the Hymnographer, on whose scroll is quoted the canon which is now sung together with the Akathistos Hymn. Typologically, the impregnable city stands for the Virgin, as in the sticheron for the Annunciation:¹¹ ἀπεστάλη δούλος ἁσώματος· πρὸς τὴν ἔμψυχον πόλιν καὶ πύλην νοεράν· μηνύσαι δεσποτικῆς παρουσίας τὴν συγκατάβασιν· ἀπεστάλη στρατιώτης οὐράνιος· πρὸς τὸ ἄχραντον τῆς δόξης παλάτιον· προετοιμάσαι τῷ κτίστῃ κατοικίαν ἀνάλωτον κτλ.

It may be that the gate of the city with the Virgin depicted in the tympanon also represents the Marian τύπος of the closed door, although, on the other hand, the gate seems to be too inconspicuous for this, half covered as it is by the Angel's garment.

In the second scene, "Aaron and His Sons,"¹² two words of the inscription can be read: "altar" and "whole-burnt-offering(s)." Of the remaining Marian lessons which have not been illustrated in the scenes already discussed, the two "Wisdom Lessons"¹³ can be eliminated. We are left with a lesson from Exodus 40, read on the eve of the Presentation, and one from Ezekiel, read for the Nativity, the Presentation, and the Dormition of the Virgin. The opening passage of this latter highly popular lesson does in fact

contain the two words that appear above the scene of "Aaron and His Sons." Using this text, I would suggest the following reading for the inscription:¹⁴

<Εσται> ἀπὸ τῆ<ς> ἡμερ(ας) τῆ<ς> ο<γ>-δο<(ης)> κ<αι> ἐπεκεῖνα | ποιήσουσιν οἱ ἱε<ρεις> ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήρ<ιον> | τὰ ὀλοκαυτωμ<ατα> | ὑμω<ν>.

This passage from Ezekiel 43 : 27 refers to a sanctuary of Israel comparable to the Temple of Solomon—not the Tabernacle of Moses, as described in the lesson from Exodus 40, but the New Temple of Sion from Ezekiel's Vision. The preceding chapters relate the return of the Lord and the purification of the Temple, after which "from the eighth day and onward...the priests shall offer your whole-burnt-offerings on the altar, and your peace-offerings; and I will accept you, saith the Lord." This would seem to prefigure the New Dispensation under which the priests of the True Church were to bring offerings pleasing to the Lord. This explanation is confirmed by Cyril of Alexandria who in the second book of his treatise "About the Adoration in the True Spirit"¹⁵ discusses the offerings of the Old Testament and their relation to the spiritual offerings of the Christians: "But most evidently God showed us the moment when the change of all things to the better shall be, (and) the manner of renewal, as He said: 'And it shall come to pass from the eighth day and onward....' By the eighth day He

¹¹ *Menaion*, 4, p. 173.

¹² Underwood, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 235–237; 3, pls. 466–468.

¹³ Prov. 8 : 22–30 and 9 : 1–11.

¹⁴ I used a photograph which Prof. Underwood kindly lent me. He also informs me that immediately after the cleaning of the fresco, he was able to read ΚΕΙΠΕ at the end of the first line.

¹⁵ PG, 68, col. 229 B.

notes the moment of the Resurrection of our Saviour.¹⁶ In this moment the whole-burnt-offerings, that is, the perfect and complete consecration of the believers unto God, (shall be) acceptable to God and a spiritual offering."

After the restoration of the Temple (i.e., restoration of mankind), the whole-burnt-offerings shall become spiritual offerings, according to Cyril. For sacrifice and incense the Christian substitutes his prayers, as in Psalm 140 (141) : 2: "Let my prayer be set before thee as incense; the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice."¹⁷ This, in turn, influences the interpretation of the three altars of the Tabernacle and the Temple. The whole-burnt-offerings were, of course, made on the brazen altar outside the sanctuary and the incense offerings on the golden incense altar which stood in the Holy of Holies, according to a common belief; the golden table of the shewbread was not used for offerings at all and was never called *θυσιαστήριον* in the Old Testament, but only *τράπεζα*. But once a year Aaron, who is the *τύπος* of Christ, made a propitiatory offering of blood on the golden incense altar.¹⁸ In Byzantine typology this made the altar interchangeable with the table of the shewbread, that is, with the communion table. In fact, we find *θυσιαστήριον* and *τράπεζα* used indiscriminately for the table of the shewbread.¹⁹ The brazen altar could also be confounded—consciously or unconsciously—with the altar of incense, as when Proclus of Constantinople talks about *τὸ χρυσοῦν τῶν ὀλοκαυτωμάτων θυσιαστήριον*.²⁰ There

seems to have been a tendency to fuse all three altars into one—the altar of the True Church—which of course would stand in the Holy of Holies, corresponding to the position of the altar in a Christian church.

In our scene, therefore, the priests can bring their whole-burnt-offerings on the altar in the Holy of Holies, identified as such by the "Glory of God" extending toward them from the upper right-hand corner. Since Mary is the image of the true believers and of the Christian Church, one can also say that they bring their spiritual offerings to the Virgin as the True Temple and the New Dispensation.

But why three priests? In the "Ecclesiastical History and Mystical Contemplation" which is ascribed, among others, to Germanus I, Patriarch of Constantinople, the church is called "the interior of the cave, where the grave is," and the altar "is, and is called the manger and the grave of the Lord."²¹ Professor Underwood suggests that the priests are highly reminiscent of the three Magi in adoration before the Virgin. The offerings in the Temple of Sion were, according to Cyril, the *τύπος* of the spiritual offerings of the New Dispensation. As long as both the Nativity and the Resurrection can be regarded as the beginning of the New Era, the Magi would be the first true believers to bring their offerings to Christ. The altar in the picture must be the "golden altar," equivalent to the altar of the Byzantine church, which is the *τύπος* of both Christ and the Virgin.²² We are left with the conclusion that the priests prefigure the three Magi bringing their incense offerings to the Virgin and to Christ at the Nativity, the inauguration of the New Dispensation. Πέπαιται γὰρ ἡ ὥς ἐν σκιαῖς λατρεῖα· καὶ ἐν χριστῷ δὴ μᾶλλον εὐωδιάζομεν τῷ πατρὶ τὴν νοητὴν εὐοσμίαν.²³

The lesson continues with Ezekiel 44 : 1-4 which contains the well-known prophecy of the closed door, the famous simile of the Virgin. This accounts for our scene having

¹⁶ The Resurrection is on the eighth day because the Sabbath is the seventh day, when the Lord rested and Jesus lay in the grave; cf. Beda Venerabilis, *In Hexaemeron*, PL, 91, col. 35 C.

¹⁷ J. Chrys., *Expositio in Ps. 140*, PG, 55, cols. 430-431, and Cyril Alex., *op. cit.*, PG, 68, col. 616 C.

¹⁸ Exod. 30:10; Cyril Alex., *op. cit.*, cols. 624 D-625 B.

¹⁹ Ps.-Methodius Olympius, *Sermo de Symeone et Anna*, PG, 18, col. 381 B: τὸ ἔμψυχον θυσιαστήριον τοῦ ἁγίου τῆς ζωῆς; Joseph the Hymnographer, *Canon for the Akathistos Hymn (Parakletike)* [Rome, 1885], p. 746), third ode: χαῖρε, ἔμψυχε τράπεζα, ἅγιον ζωῆς χωρήσασα.

²⁰ *Oratio de laudibus S. Mariae*, PG, 65, col. 753 B.

²¹ PG, 98, cols. 388 C and 389 B.

²² Andreas Caesarensis, *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, PG, 106, col. 288 B; Jacobus ex monasterio Coccinobaphi, *Oratio in Nativitatem SS. Deiparae*, PG, 127, col. 576 C.

²³ Cyril Alex., *op. cit.*, col. 616 C.

been connected with the closed-door-Mary motive in the Pammakaristos monastery.²⁴ Whether or not the continuation of the lesson would be present in the mind of the person who looked at the fresco in Kariye Djami we cannot know. Ezekiel 43 : 27 has probably been chosen as an introduction to the lesson because it had the connotation of

²⁴ Cyril Mango and Ernest J. W. Hawkins, "Report on Field Work in Istanbul and Cyprus, 1962-1963," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 18 (1964), p. 324 and figs. 10-11.

the New Dispensation, but this opening paragraph is by no means so charged with symbolism as is the fresco. The closed door is the main point of the lesson, just as it is the common τύπος of the Virgin in literature and pictorial representation. It would be interesting to know whether it was the painter himself who detached the prefatory paragraph from the rest of the lesson and reinterpreted it by associating the anonymous priests of the Temple of Sion with the three Magi in adoration of the Virgin.